

## BEGGARS IN ITALY.

### A SKETCH FROM LIFE.

There seems to prevail a traditional belief among the Italians, that all strangers who arrive at their shores are travellers par excellence, come in search of the pleasures and enjoyments peculiar to their country, and that the natives have consequently a just claim upon their generosity, if not even a prescriptive right to levy a tax upon them in the shape of alms and charity. Indeed, the beggar in Italy occupies an original page in the mendicity-history of nations. I do not allude here to the indigent old, infirm, lame, blind, sick, and cripples, who are met with in all countries of Europe, but solely to the idle vagabonds who prefer begging to working, because it is more easy and convenient, and to those who try to enforce their presumptive claim, not from want or necessity, but from sheer homage to the popular custom.

The children, of all ages, constitute by far the largest portion of that community, and it is these juvenile beggars in particular that prove a perfect nuisance and try the patience of the most patient traveller in Italy. At every place where he stops, either to enjoy the beauties of Nature or of art, he is sure to be surrounded by a swarm of these juveniles, who pursue their object with a perseverance worthy of a better cause. They are found in troops in the streets and in the fine walks round the place; and were you to give to each of them only a five-centime piece, your alms in that way would amount to more than a Louis-d'or per day.

In Piedmont, Lombardy, and Venice, they are neither so numerous nor so annoying; but in Central Italy, in the so-called (late) Duchies, the class has arrived at the climax of development, nor is it in the least checked in its vocation by either police or any other local authority. At every church — nay, in the church itself — at every public edifice, gallery, and even street corner or road that leads to some visitable spot, you encounter them hands open, and begging in atone and language that frequently partakes of the character of an absolute demand. With admirable tact and cunning, they post themselves at the narrowest spot of an up-hill road, where the horses can proceed only at a very slow pace; there they thrust their hats into the very midst of the vehicle, and exclaim incessantly, "*Povero infelice, Signor!*" until you satisfy them with a gratuity. At a café at Leghorn, a good-looking and decently-dressed woman presented herself at my table for alms, after having despatched her four children, one by one, to me for the same purpose. At Florence, I was stopped in the street by several well-dressed men and women, who made some inquiries, or drew my attention to some notice or placard, after which they held out their hands by way of leave-taking, to claim the usual alien-tribute, called alms.

At the port of Leghorn, I found at every street corner a number of beggars with a sort of money box in hand, which they continually rattled, and accosted the passers-by with the usual "*Povero infelice, Signor!*" I perceived by the sound, that each of the boxes only contained one single copper coin, the remainder having no doubt been taken out and pocketed as soon as they were thrown in.

I was one morning looking out of my bedroom window of the third floor in the hotel where I was staying, to enjoy the beautiful sight of the sea below me, when I was noticed by a cripple to whom I had unfortunately given on the previous day, in passing along the street, a few coppers. He soon recognised me, nodded with his hat to me, and indulged in all sorts of ridiculous gestures and grimaces, until I threw him down a copper coin wrapped in a bit of paper. This was the signal for him to fix his regular station before my window; he followed me, as soon as I made my appearance at the street door for a walk, upon his little truck, which he wheeled with his hands, incessantly exclaiming, "*Monsieur, donnez-moi quelque chose!*" (he heard me talk to the porter in French) until he got something out of me. But my ill-luck did not finish there. No sooner had I thrown down, in the first instance, from my window the copper coin to the cripple, than it was observed by some of the fraternity, and brought to the spot the whole beggar community of the quarter, men, women, and children, who, rattling, crying, singing, and throwing up their hats, made the spot a perfect nuisance to me, and obliged me at last to keep my windows shut, and forego the fine sight of the blue sea before me.

In the church of San Marco, at Venice, I saw a woman with a veil over her head, prostrated on the steps of one of the altars. She was wringing her hands and praying in deep devotion, and seemed to labour under great mental affliction. On my passing her, she half rose, and stretched out her hand for charity; I at once put some copper coins into it, which she immediately threw into the poor-

box that stood nailed to a pillar a few steps from the altar, after which she returned and resumed her former position and prayers. I looked at her for some moments with an air of astonishment, which was perceived by a gentleman not far off, who then stepped towards me and remarked, "Don't believe, *Signor*, that this woman is poor; she is well off, and even possesses a house of her own, but she is a penitent, and in deep contrition here, daily, begs alms for the Holy Virgin." What added still more to my astonishment was the circumstance, that the informant did not himself hold out his hand for a gratuity for the information he had just given me, though it was uncalled for. I was actually surprised at his forbearance, recollecting that a few days previously, when on the *Piazza della Signora*, at Florence, I happened to ask a well-dressed gentleman my way to a neighbouring street; he at once offered to guide me thither, observing that he was going himself that way. Having reached the street, I was about taking my leave with a "*Grazie, Signor*," when he held out his hand for a donation, and I put a 20-centime piece into it.

The rough picture I have drawn above of the character and conduct of the beggars is, however, frequently softened by some mild and humane traits in the character of some of the younger generation. I was sitting before a cafe at Genoa, leisurely sipping my cup of coffee (the Italians can drink that beverage at any hour in the day), when a cripple, quite a child, approached my table for some alms; I gave him the four lumps of sugar remaining on the waiter or salver before me, with which he limped away to the three other cripples close by, still younger than himself, and put a lump into each of the

ugly mouths of his companions, keeping one for himself. I saw by the likeness of their features that they were all brothers and sisters. He then pointed me out to them with the finger, and they looked so gratefully and smilingly at me, and smacked their lips all the while with the sweet food in their mouths, that I resolved to gratify them with the gift as often as they made their appearance. Next day I found them at their post before the café, and having received their four lumps, they moved away without asking for anything else. On arriving at some of the villages which have acquired a name amongst the tourists for some architectural beauty or fine scenery, the whole population, men, women, and children, and even able-bodied and good-looking people, are out begging. They surround the unfortunate traveller in large numbers, each and all putting forth their hands for alms, and do not stir from the spot, despite all the "*andante al diavolos*" he may tell them, until he has complied with their demand. I went in company of a friend to Fiesole, near Florence, which commands a view of the whole of the Arno valley and the city of Dante, a scenery of unparalleled beauty. We were ten times stopped on the way, though but a short distance, by intrusive beggars, and my friend told me a story, how he had once, near Candénabbia, been stopped, within half an hour, six times by beggars in the very hottest mid-day hour, when the more decent of the fraternity usually keep their siesta. He had just come to the end of his story, when we arrived at Fiesole, and halted on the square before the Basilica, whence we were about to ascend the steep footpath leading to the Capuchin cloister, when we were in a moment surrounded by men, women, and children, each house furnishing its contingent of beggars, and in whose

company we were compelled to ascend to the cloister. All had some straw-work and plattings to offer for sale. They would accept of no excuse or assurance that they were of no use to us. I was particularly pressed to buy for a franc a straw-plumage; I might present it, they said, to my Signora; I might stick it in my hat, or carry it in my hand as an ornament, &c., &c. But when they saw that all persuasive suggestions for purchase were unavailable, they turned beggars in the strictest sense of the term, held out their hands, and demanded their usual tax of alms. Not one of them accompanied their request with the customary "*povero infelice*," or even '*povero*' alone, but actually demanded a five-centime piece a head. We at last ransomed our freedom by handing for distribution to a black-eyed, pretty girl a few copper coins, and telling the others to go "*al diavolo*," at which they all burst into a loud, merry laughter, apparently well pleased with the "beggar's comedy" they had been playing.